USDA

United States
Department
of Agriculture

Office of
Communications

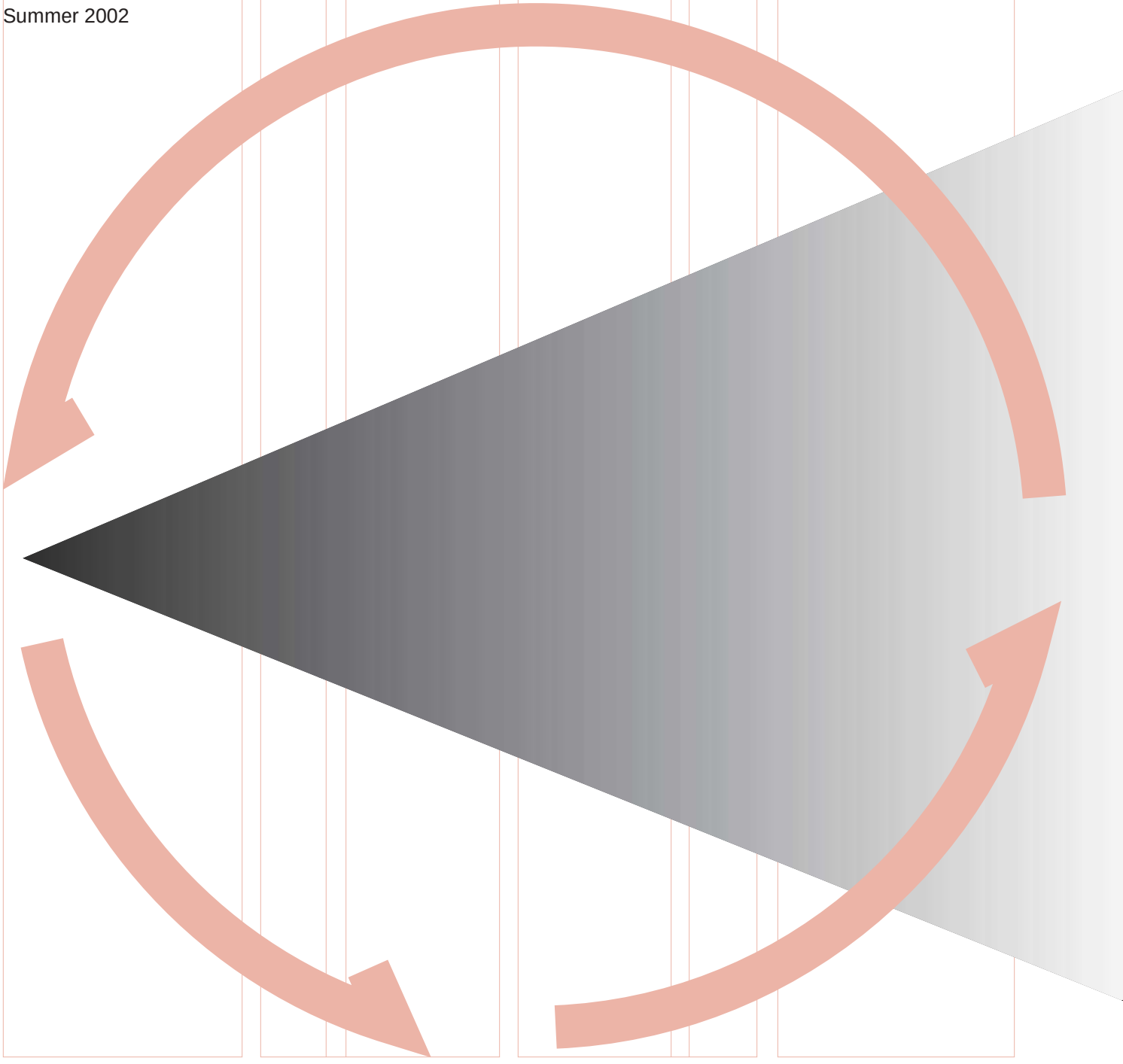
Design Center

Summer 2002

Visual Management Guide

USDA Visual Information Standards

Generic Standards



Introduction

Contents

USDA information

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) generates and disseminates information about its programs and activities to the U.S. agricultural community, to a large segment of the nonfarm population, and to many foreign nationals. The complexity of USDA information is broad. Within the varied audiences are both willing and unwilling readers who range from agricultural scientists to inner-city school children. All communication methods and media are utilized: print, video, radio, film, Internet Web sites, e-mail, billboards, signs, data transmission networks, press releases, exhibits, visitor centers, meetings, symposia, and speeches.

Audiences' receptivity to information is based on judgments they make about the importance of the information and their opinion of the sender. Such judgments are made and opinions formed whether or not an organization makes an effort to solicit them. If information is clearly presented at an appropriate level of understanding, audiences will respond positively. Consistency with the quality and style of presentation is the basis of standards. When these standards are applied, the Department links with its audiences, communication is enhanced, and the unit cost for information products is reduced.

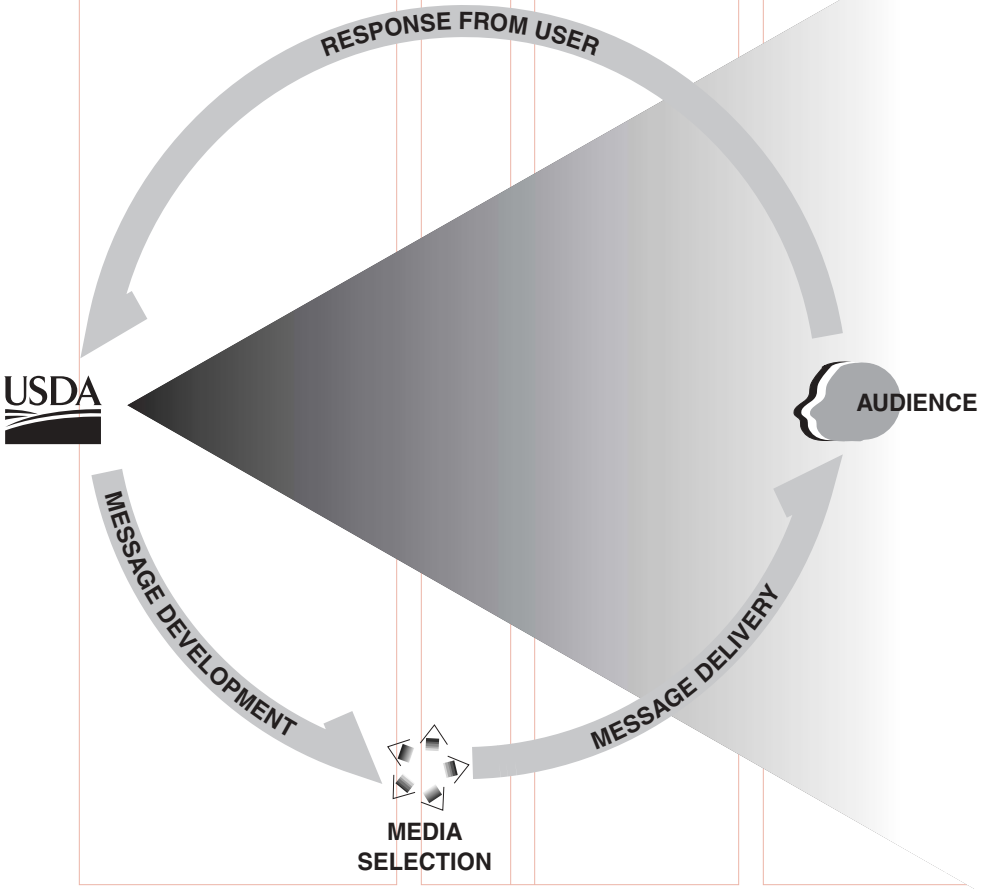
To help forge this link, these generic specifications, common to all visual information, are presented as a guide for communication planners. These standards are compatible with mandatory visual standards and *USDA Visual Information Standards, Print, Dimensional, Presentation and Electronic Media, Specifications and Uses,* also issued by the Office of Communications Design Center. Other conforming standards are: *Office of Communications Guidelines, Style Guidelines for Media Materials,* January 2002; *USDA Stationery Systems, Specifications and Uses,* December 1998; *The USDA Symbol, Its Purpose and Use,* August 1996. Certain compatible standards have been established for agencies and programs. They are *Service Center Signs, National Food and Agricultural Council,* September 1996; *Design Standards, Farm Service Agency,* November 1997; and style guides for identities established with the Risk Management Agency, the Economic Research Service, the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service, and for certain programs in the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

USDA Communications Loop

The responsibility of USDA information

For USDA information to be meaningful and cost effective, it must be clearly written and presented through an appropriate media. Most important it must close the communications loop by being received, understood, and responded to by the intended audience—**only then is there communication**. To be accepted, messages must be audience specific, that is, written and presented in a format receptive to a given audience. Those who create USDA information need to be aware of the willingness (or unwillingness) of readers, the multiplicity of media choices, and most important, the competitiveness in the communication environment (the place where all information is received). A means of measuring its acceptance should be part of every USDA program's communication plan. The process is: message generation ➡ transfer through media ➡ receipt by user ➡ response by user ➡ measurement of user response. **The goal of all USDA communication is to close the loop**. The Department is committed to adherence of guidelines established for special audiences under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).

Components of the USDA Communications Loop



USDA Audiences

Academe

Agents and Educators

Agricultural Businesses

Agricultural Managers and Advisors

Agricultural Producers/Farmers and Ranchers

Associations/Partners

Consumers

Food Processors/Importers, Exporters

Foresters

USDA and Other Government Workers

Inspectors/Food Safety Workers

Natural Resource and Environment Workers

Researchers

Rural Nonfarm Workers

School Lunch and Other Food Providers

Shippers

Special Program/Outreach Recipients

Students

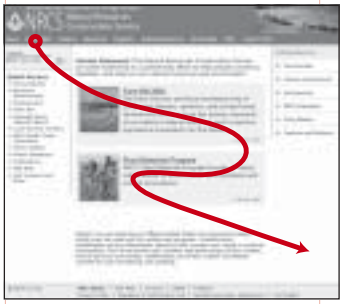
1. Begin at the Beginning

There are too many pages for office workers every business day. We cannot do much about the receiver, we are not going to reengineer the human brain—we are analog creatures.

Top-to-bottom, left-to-right.
All who learn to read in Western alphabets are taught to begin at the top of a page and read left to right, top to bottom. This process, known as following the **Gutenberg Window**, is applicable to all media. Other arrangements of information risk slowing the reader and diminishing perception. Information in varied electronic media, such as Web sites, can be manipulated with color and motion, attracting the eye to any part of the screen. While appropriate for selling products and highlighting priorities, the basic reading process remains the same and deviation from the norm may place a burden on the reader by increasing reading time. Begin at the beginning.

The Standard

Adhere to the principal of the Gutenberg Window, top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading. Be aware that the eye begins searching for information in the top left corner and will naturally move to the lower right corner. Place information elements to capture this process.



Screen

Page

Slide

2. Visual Accessibility

Generic Standards

1. Begin at the Beginning
top-to-bottom, left-to-right
2. Visual Accessibility
white space
3. Infozones
ordered information
4. The Gray Stuff
readable messages
5. Infographics
visualized data
6. Pixel Media
Web pages

Information overload is when there is too much information to perceive. It gets ignored, passed along unattended, or given an arbitrary review. This happens with as much as 25% of all information we receive.

White space.
The presentation of visual information begins with a blank page, screen, or exhibit panel. Every element added—text, images, and data—increases the information available to the reader. It also increases the complexity of information the reader must sort in order to comprehend. The blank part of a page is known as **"white space,"** regardless of what colors are used. The more white space there is on a page, the greater the opportunity for seeing and perceiving information elements. However, for reasons of economy, pages cannot be left mostly blank. Studies have shown there to be an efficient ratio between the text, images, data, and the white space surrounding these elements. When an appropriate ratio is obtained, the information is offered good visual accessibility, and communication is enhanced.

The Standard

The established ratio for USDA visual information is 60% for the text/image/data area and 40% dedicated to white space. An appropriate range is 58/42 to 65/35.

Exhibit

White space

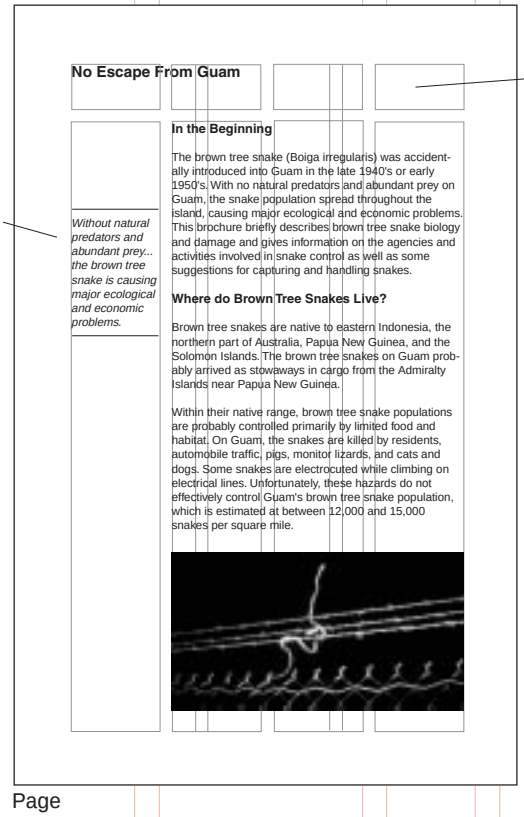
Zones

Title/heading

Call out

Text

Illustration



Page

3. Infozones

Generic Standards

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Web pages

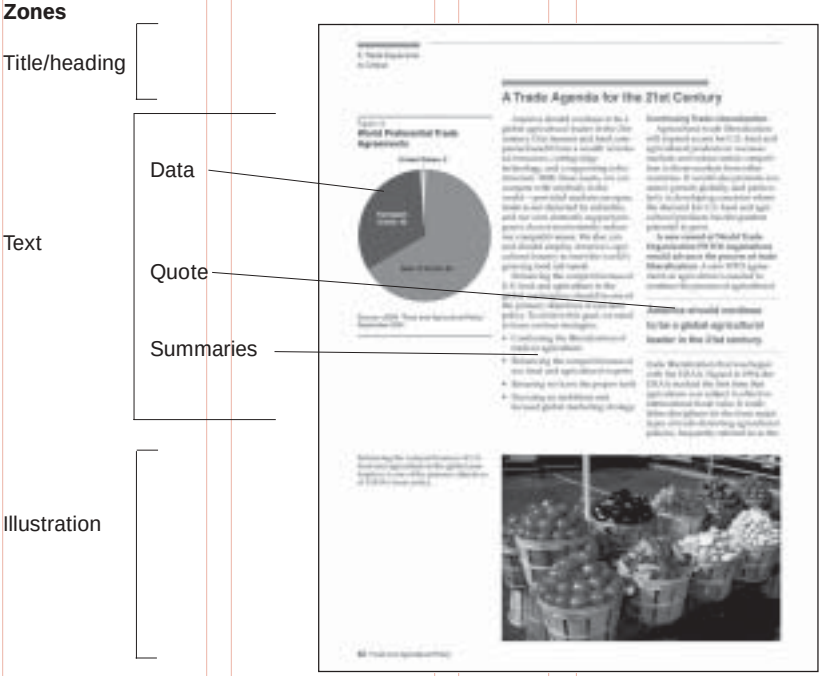
Zoned pages were developed for application to reference books, manuals, catalogs, and textbooks, where quick retrieval is more important than linear storytelling.

Ordered information.
The increasingly competitive communication environment demands that information be presented in a deliberate purposeful manner, regardless of media used. Infozones, **info**rmation ordered into **zones,** accomplish this. They provide clear visual itineraries for readers by connecting pertinent parts in a logical order. Typographic grids and other unit systems, a manner of dividing a blank space (page, screen, or exhibit), are used to establish zones. Zones are places to assign the elements of visual information: *text* (titles, heads, story, call-outs, summaries, captions, quotes), *images* (photos, spot art, illustrations), *data* (charts, tabular material, infographics), and *white space*. Zones may have subsets. Elements like call-outs, quotes, tables, tabular material, infographics, and images may be placed into separate zones or within a text zone. Zones, when prioritized by content, create ordered information.

The Standard

1. Set up a grid system to create zones.
2. Give the zones a hierarchy and assign the information elements to the zones by order of dominant, sub-dominate, and subordinate.
3. Limit the number of information elements in a zone, preferably to three.
4. Within the dominate text zone, identify quotes and or call-outs, and write summaries.
5. Visualize data to the extent possible.
6. Select only images that support, explain, or enhance the text.
7. Follow the rules for adequate white space.

Zones



The typographic grid system shown on this page is based on the page divided into three columns with zones for heads and titles, text, images, and subsets within the text zone.

4. The Gray Stuff

Readable messages.
Written language—the titles, text, and captions we see on pages, screens, and exhibits—is presented as "typography." It has been referred to as **the gray stuff**. Typography is made up of embellished letterforms called "typefaces" and "fonts." They fall into two broad categories: serifs (those with end strokes), and sans serif (those without). Readable typography involves the manner in which fonts are set (typesetting), derived from research findings about readability and legibility. These standards are concerned with the style of typeface (such as Times Roman), its size (expressed in points), the space between characters (letter spacing), the space between words (word spacing), the space between lines (line spacing or leading), the length of a line (line length), the alignment of lines (ragged or irregular, centered, and justified) and the contrast between the typography and the background (color).

The Standard

Typeface: For mainstream USDA communications, the typeface should be a clean open typeface with few embellishments set in the size of 9 to 12 points. The typeface example shown is 12 point Times Roman. The other typography on this page is Helvetica.

Letterspacing: A letterspace is a small percent of the square of the type. It is built into the design of the font.

Word spacing: Word spacing is approximately 20% of the square of the type. It is usually set as a default in computer typesetting applications.

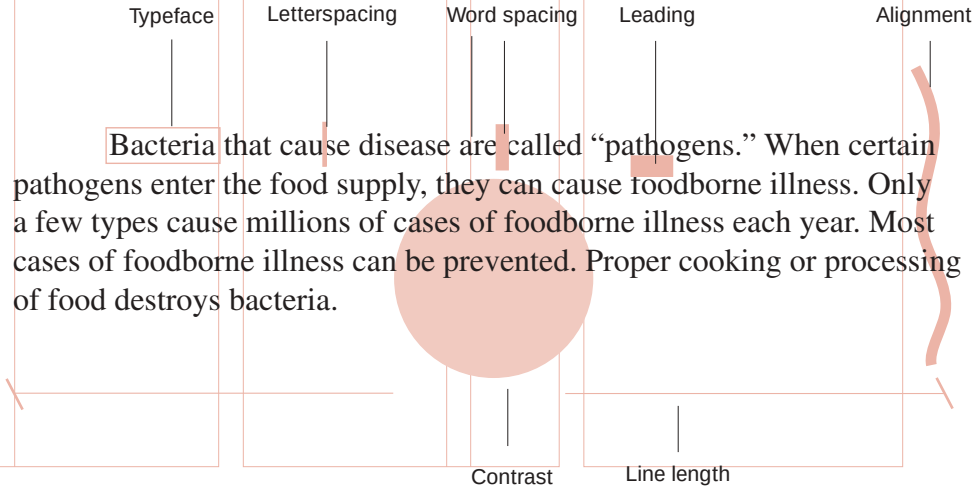
Leading: The optimum space between lines is noted as 120% of the type size. Leading is measured in points. The example shown is expressed as 12/14.5 (12 point type set on 14.5 points).

Alignment: The alignment shown is called "ragged right" or "irregular right." The other kind of alignments are "justified," and "centered." Justified is when all lines begin and end evenly. Justified should not be used for lines shorter than 70 characters.

Line length: The line length for optimum readability is approximately 2.5 times the alphabet, or 65 characters.

Contrast: Readability is aided when the background color, page, or screen is not more than 30% of the color of the type. The example shown is 20%.

Type sizes of 9 to 12 points are equally legible. Line length may vary. Very short lines increase the number and duration of fixation pauses. Very long lines greatly increase the number of regressions.



5. Infographics

"The world is complex, dynamic, multidimensional; the paper is static, flat. How are we to represent the rich visual world of experience and measurement on mere flatland?"

Edward Tufte, *Envisioning Information*, Graphics Press 1990.

Visualized data.
Graphics and data support linear content. **Info**rmation **graphics** help explain the relationship between content and data by visualizing the quantity of things within the framework of a subject. Infographics enhance traditional bar charts, line graphs, and pie charts by adding the visual dimension. They are collective summaries that help the reader to quickly identify pertinent points in a message.

The Standard

Show elements in accurate proportional relationship to each other (the same as would be seen in traditional charts or graphs).

Illustrate a theme icon (a visual metaphor) that best presents what the data are showing. Use easily recognizable icons that the audience will understand.

Simplify the illustration to contain no more than three visual elements.

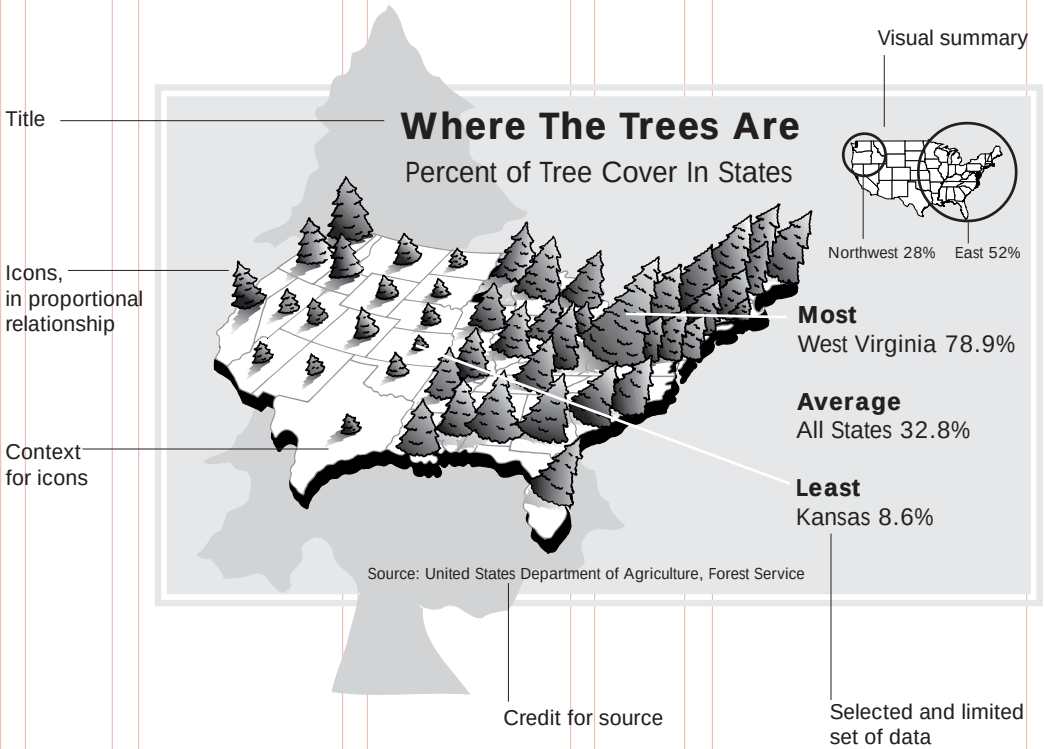
Place the illustration in a context which reflects the title.

Select and limit the data presented.

Use visual summaries when possible.

Write brief challenging titles. Ask a question, make a statement.

Give the source for the data.



6. Pixel Media

Only about 10% of Web surfers ever scroll the page.

Web pages.

The Internet, an international system of computer networks, offers information in many forms. We are most familiar with Web pages, a hypertext-based system that allows us to retrieve documents which may contain text, graphics, audio, and motion. A Web page's structural origin is in printed pages and the principles of print design apply. But Web pages "stand alone." Consequently, they must contain sufficient information to:

- inform the user who is presenting the information (identifiers),
- provide a clearly structured format so that content is easily understood (hierarchies, titles, headers and supporting graphics), and
- direct users to related material (navigational tools).

Design consistently. The use of zones for the basic elements (identifiers, navigation buttons, titles and content) is essential.

The Standard

Organize content by subject matter rather than by your organization's structure. Make navigation clear and uncluttered. Write effective headings, use hierarchies. Be succinct. Long running text is usually not read.

Avoid "splash screens." Animation, virtual reality, and sound gimmicks slow page download times. Keep the code simple by using style sheets instead of font tags. Style sheets speed coding and decrease page load times.

Avoid serif fonts such as Times Roman. Use sans serif fonts like Arial or Verdana.

Use colors only for clarity and emphasis. Maintain appropriate contrast between text and background. A plain white background is best.

Keep content width to about 800 pixels to accommodate most monitors.

Mandatory USDA standards: All USDA agency home pages must have links to the agency's home page, the main USDA home page, the USDA nondiscrimination statement, the USDA privacy policy, the agency's Freedom of Information Act Web site, and FirstGov. Some agencies may require links to partner or cooperator Web sites. Always provide links back to main level pages from all secondary pages in the site.

Zones